

A Study Guide to Hosea

Outlined with Sectional Summaries

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A Study Guide to the Book of Hosea: *Outlined with Sectional Summaries*

Introduction

That the book of Hosea is a most difficult book to study and interpret seems to be the general consensus of those involved in Old Testament biblical scholarship. Unlike some books of the Old Testament, the book of Hosea is loosely organized and, therefore, necessitates caution rather than confidence in interpretation. The prophet makes use of images, metaphors, proverbs, allegories, prophetic idioms, and even his own personal experience in formulating his message. In view of such a variety of expressions, coupled with the rarity of extended passages which deal with a particular subject, the difficulties of the book become even more axiomatic or self-evident.

The uniqueness of Hosea's book is that God chose to mediate His message through the marital experience of His prophet. It is, indeed, rare that such a medium of revelation was chosen. However, such is the case with Hosea. Thus, the prophecy of this book has been mediated with such passion and compassion that probably could not have been achieved otherwise. He who walks into the book of Hosea will walk out with a greater awareness of the enormity of God's love, the tragedy of sin, and the breadth of God's grace.

In this study guide to the book of Hosea, a brief summary will focus attention on the prophet himself, the period of his ministry, the various views concerning his marriage, and the influence of Canaanite mythology upon the people of his time. An attempt has been made to outline the book in such a way as to facilitate the learning process. Sectional summaries should also assist the reader in grasping the overall focus of selected passages. The conclusion consists of practical lessons from the book which have relevant and permanent value.

The Prophet

The title of the book is derived from the name of the prophet himself. The prophet's name, *Hosea*, means "deliverance or salvation." The book has very little direct information about the prophet. According to 1:1, his father's name is *Beer*, meaning "well." There are also indications in the book that he was a native of the Northern Kingdom or Israel. The pronoun "our" in 7:5 suggests his affiliation with Israel. According to 4:1-10; 6:8-10, and 9:2-9, he had some knowledge of the religious corruption in Israel. He refers to Samaria, the capital of Israel, on at least four occasions (7:1; 8:5; 10:5, 7). The religious centers of Israel, Bethel and Gilgal, are mentioned on several occasions (4:15; 5:8; 9:15; 10:5; 12:4, 11), as well as several other cities in the Northern Kingdom (5:1, 8; 6:8-9; 12:11). Thus, one is led to conclude that the prophet's familiarity with Israel is due to the fact that he was a native of the Northern Kingdom.

The Period of His Ministry

The first verse of chapter one indicates that the prophet ministered during the days of Jeroboam II, king of Israel from 786-746 B.C. Jeroboam II was the fourth king of the Jehu dynasty and under his reign, Israel was experiencing a time of peace and prosperity. The reference in 1:1 to "Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah," seems only to indicate

that Hosea was a contemporary of Isaiah who was ministering to the Southern Kingdom or Judah at this same period of time.

As an aid in discovering the time at which Hosea began his ministry, 1:4 plays a significant role. This verse refers to the “house of Jehu.” Now since there was only one king of the Jehu dynasty who reigned after Jeroboam II, namely, Zechariah, who reigned for only six months (746-745), his ministry had to begin at least by 745 B.C. and probably even earlier in 750 B.C. Thus, it was in the closing days of the reign of Jeroboam II.

It was this time of outward peace and prosperity under the reign of Jeroboam II that had given the people of Israel a false sense of security. Even though the skies were bright and atmospheric conditions were clear, Israel was spiritually polluted.

Although there have been various proposals as to when his ministry ended, the evidence that is most convincing to this writer points to about 725 B.C. Thus, the ministry of Hosea extended from around 750 to 725 B.C., a period of some twenty-five years.

Views Concerning the Marriage

The views concerning the marriage of Hosea to Gomer are almost as varied as the number of people who study the book. For present purposes, however, we shall mention only two

The *allegorical* view insists that the marriage was intended as an allegory of the relationship between Yahweh and Israel. This view disregards the historicity of the marriage. The *retroactive* view states that the narrative relates the actual marriage of the prophet as later understood by him. In other words, Hosea relates the actual marriage experience and looks back upon his unfortunate marriage experience in such a way that he draws parallels between his own experience and the experience between God and Israel. By looking back, he came to see that Gomer did have latent tendencies toward harlotry, just as the nation of Israel had latent experiences toward spiritual harlotry. In 9:10-12:14, for example, he traces the sinful course of Israel. Nevertheless, Hosea loves Gomer even as the Lord loves the people of Israel.

The Influence of Canaanite Mythology

Some knowledge of Canaanite mythology and its influence upon the people of Israel at this time is almost indispensable for a proper understanding and interpretation of the book. The references to “Baal” (a god of the Canaanites) throughout the book (2:8, 13, 16, 17; 9:10; 11:2; 13:1) necessitate a brief investigation of Baalism and its impact on Israel.

In Canaanite mythology, Baal was the main offspring of the supreme god (El) and his wife (Anath). Baal was the god of winter rain and storm and had influence on the welfare of the land. He was a dying and rising god, slain in the summer by Mot (the god of drought), but would rise from the dead after the subsequent death of Mot. On his resurrection, Baal would nurture the land. This was a cyclic process. Israel soon began to look to Baal instead of Yahweh as the one “from whom all blessings flow.”

The Canaanite emphasis on fertility and the role of the sacred prostitute also had an impact on Israel. The Canaanites emphasized that a cosmic union of the god and goddess would effect the same type of creative power within the order of nature. The purpose of the cultic prostitute was to experience sexual union with a male as an effort to induce fertility between the god and goddess. Such practice was called *sympathetic magic*.

This was the atmosphere in which Hosea ministered. Israel probably was not thinking of completely forsaking Yahweh; they only added the fertility practices for “safety precautions” – just in case there was more to things than they knew. However, many of the Israelites *had forsaken* Yahweh and went whoring after other gods. Thus, much of the message of Hosea focuses on these aspects of Canaanite religion.

Outlined with Sectional Summaries

- I Hosea’s Odd Family (ch. 1-3)
- II Hosea’s Oracular Fragments (ch. 4-14)

- I Hosea’s Odd Family (1:1-3:5)
 - A. Strange Command (1:2-3)

The author uses the unfortunate marriage experience between Hosea and Gomer to parallel the relationship between Yahweh and Israel.

- B. Significant Children (1:4-9)
 - 1. Jezreel (1:4-5)
 - 2. Lo-ruhamah (1:6-7)
 - 3. Lo-amni (1:8-9)

The author uses the names of the children of Hosea and Gomer to point out that the covenant between Yahweh and Israel had been ruptured. *Jezreel* means “God sows.” It was in Jezreel that the house of Jehu, who ruled Israel from 842-745 B.C., had been established by bloodshed. *Lo-ruhamah* means “not pitted” and refers to the coming judgment. *Lo-ammi* means “not my people” and underscores the face of covenant disruption.

- C. Sudden Conversion (1:10-2:1)

This section anticipates a time in the future when reunion between Israel and Judah will be a reality.

- D. Specific Complaint (2:2)

The children (individuals of Israel) are called upon to bring complaint against their mother (nation of Israel). The purpose of this appeal is for rectification.

- E. Separating Course (2:3-5)

If Israel fails to heed the admonition, the result of such a choice will surely be punishment.

F. Shameful Consequences (2:6-13)

The consequences of Israel's disobedience are inevitable. However, since God is God and not man, He does not respond in such a way as to forever turn Israel off. Instead, He seeks to guide her back to Himself. In other words, the consequences are for disciplinary purposes.

G. Significant Covenant (2:14-23)

1. New Beginning (2:14-15)
2. New Behavior (2:16-17)
3. New Betrothal (2:18-20)
4. New Blessing (2:21-23)

The shameful consequences which came upon Israel were not merely punitive without a higher purpose. In fact, the higher purpose was that of renewal and of leading her back to the covenant life. It will, indeed, be a new day.

H. Seeking Chesed (3:1-5)

1. Responds (3:1)
2. Redeems (3:2)
3. Renews (3:3)
4. Reigns (3:4-5)

Just as Gomer was not worthy of Hosea's love, so, Israel was not worthy of Yahweh's love. Nevertheless, it was nothing less than seeking, self-giving love (*chesed*) that made renewal possible. Hosea parallels the return of Gomer with the renewal of Israel.

II Hosea's Oracular Fragments (4:1-14:9)

This second division is loosely organized and consists of a series of oracles (divine messages) which are directed against Israel's unfaithfulness. This division closes with an urgent appeal to return to the Lord. Any subdivision of this section is problematic and therefore excludes dogmatism.

A. Spiritual Corrosion (4:1-19)

1. The Controversy (4:1-3)
2. The Contention (4:4-10)
3. The Cult (4:11-14)
4. The Captives (4:15-19)

This section opens with a complaint against the Israelites and is followed by an itemization of their crimes. This is followed by the announcement of coming judgment. Verses 4-10 deal with the Lord's contention with the priesthood, while verses 11-14 focus attention on the cultic community. The basis theme

of verses 15-19 is that Israel is captive to her own folly.

- B. Spiritual Correction (5:1-6:6)
1. The Chastisement (5:1-2)
 2. The Causes (5:3-7)
 3. The Crisis (5:8-14)
 4. The Confession (5:15-6:3)
 5. The Cry (6:4-6)

The announcement of judgment is stated with clarity, followed by an enumeration of those causes for the judgment (vs. 3-7). Verses 8-14 most likely refer to the crisis of the Syro-Ephraimitic War and the actions of both Israel and Judah. The theme of 5:15-6:3 is that Yahweh wants Israel to respond to Him in penitence. 6:4-6 emphasize that the people's response came short of Yahweh's expectation.

- C. Sinful Conduct (6:7-7:16)
1. The Covenant (6:7)
 2. The Conspiracy (6:8)
 3. The Clergy (6:9)
 4. The Concentration (6:10-11a)
 5. The Corruption (6:11b-7:2)
 6. The Contrivance (7:3-7)
 7. The Coalitions (7:8-12)
 8. The Contemptibleness (7:13-16)

This section reflects upon the conduct of Israel that had prevented their restoration with Yahweh. They had transgressed the covenant at Adam (6:7), a small city in the Jordan Valley. The reference to Gilead (6:8) may be referring to the political intrigue of Pekah in 737 B.C. Some of the priests of Israel were involved in murdering people on the way to Shechem (6:9), for some unknown reason. Reference to the "house of Israel" seems to concentrate on the guilt of the entire nation. 7:3-7 was probably occasioned by the assassination of Pekah in 732 B.C. The coalitions and alliances of Israel with other nations is the subject of 7:8-12, while 7:13-16 is a protest against their contemptibleness.

- D. Shameful Comments (8:1-14)
1. The Covenant (8:1-3)
 2. The Contests (8:4a)
 3. The Calves (8:4b-7)
 4. The Coalitions (8:8-10)
 5. The Cursiveness (8:11-14)

This oracle continues with the shameful comments on the sins of Israel. The accurateness of the indictment is exemplified by referring again to their

breaking of the covenant, the disruption of kingship from 745 to 732 B.C., the setting up of idols, the international policies, and the cursorness of their worship.

- E. Sudden Crushing (9:1-9)
 - 1. The Cost (9:1-6)
 - 2. The Comments (9:7-9)

Hosea assumes their ultimate crushing. He informs them of what it will cost them, and then adds a few additional comments about their treatment of Him.

- F. Six Crises (9:10-12:14)
 - 1. Baal-Peor (9:10-14)
 - a. The Consecration (9:10)
 - b. The Corrosion (9:11-14)
 - 2. Gilgal (9:15-17)
 - a. The Compulsion (9:15)
 - b. The Curse (9:16)
 - c. The Castoffs (9:17)
 - 3. Bethel (10:1-8)
 - a. The Condition (10:1-4)
 - b. The Calf (10:5-6)
 - c. The Cry (10:7-8)
 - 4. Gibeah (10:9-15)
 - a. The Chastisement (10:9-10)
 - b. The Circumvention (10:11-13a)
 - c. The Comparison (10:13b-15)
 - 5. Egypt (11:1-11)
 - a. The Call (11:1-2)
 - b. The Care (11:3-4)
 - c. The Conflict (11:5-7)
 - d. The Compassion (11:8-9)
 - e. The Commitment (11:10-11)
 - 6. Jacob (11:12-12:14)
 - a. The Complaint (11:12-12:1)
 - b. The Case (12:2-6)
 - c. The Confidence (12:7-8)
 - d. The Confrontation (12:9-11)
 - e. The Contrast (12:12-14)

Hosea traces the present state of infatuation with Baalism to the historical crisis of Israel's encounter with Baal of Peor, as recorded in Numbers 25:1-5. It was in Gilgal that Saul was established as the first king over Israel (1 Sam. 11:12-13:14). It was this monarchical establishment that was an offense to Yahweh.

Hosea traces the religious infidelity of Israel back to the erection of the golden calf at Bethel (1 Kings 12:26-33) under Jeroboam I.

Reference in 10:9-15 may be to the assault of the Levite's concubine at Gibeah (Judges 19) or to the fact that Gibeah was the home of Saul, the first king of the monarchical establishment.

Hosea points out that Israel's rejection of Yahweh's love and grace began in Egypt and that her present crisis is the inevitable consequence of that action.

Hosea suggests that the present deception and self-will of Israel are traceable back to Jacob (Genesis 28).

- G. Sad Commentary (13:1-16)
 - 1. The Conduct (13:1-3)
 - 2. The Charge (13:4-6)
 - 3. The Curse (13:7-9)
 - 4. The Challenge (13:10-11)
 - 5. The Conclusion (13:12-16)

After giving a summary of Israel's sinful course, Hosea now focuses attention on the present conduct. He sounds forth the sobering news that all Israel can look forward to is destruction. It is a sad commentary on the fate of those who forsake Yahweh.

- H. Salvation Call (14:1-9)
 - 1. The Comment (14:1-3)
 - 2. The Cure (14:4-8)
 - 3. The Commendation (14:9)

The central thrust of this section is an exhortation for Israel to return to Yahweh, coupled with a promise of salvation. The closing verse is both an evaluation and a commendation for the one who reads the book.

Practical Lessons From the Book

1. The love of God is both inexhaustible and incomparable.
2. The relationship between God and His people is best illustrated by the sacred bond of marriage.
3. The mediums through which God may communicate His message to man are limitless.
4. The purpose of God's discipline and chastisement is conciliatory.
5. Apostasy is a threatening reality to God's people.
6. Idolatry may take any form.
7. The history of sin is a sad one.
8. Superficial worship is an abomination to God.
9. Known sin separates us from close fellowship with God.
10. God promises forgiveness and renewal to those who repent of their sin and disobedience.

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